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Embassy RIO DE JANEIRO

Current Trend in Church-State Relations

November 10, 1970

SUMMARY:

Following several months of relative calm in the perennially sensitive area of Brazilian Church-State relations, a series of incidents have occurred recently which have revived talk of the inevitability of conflict and perhaps confrontation between the two institutions and all that such would portend for this, the nation with the largest Catholic populace. In the wake of various meetings between the highest leaders in the Church and President Eulio Garrastazu Medici and receipt by the Church of Medici's assurances that he deplores all such "incidents" and will do everything possible to avoid their repetition in the future, another period of calm has settled in. The question remains, what is the prognosis for a relaxation of the tension and for the two entities to work together over the long term? The Embassy feels it virtually inevitable that the Church and the State will continue to view each other with suspicion, if not at times hostility, and that our forecast would have to be for continued instability and cloudiness, broken by intermittent storms and occasional periods of weak sun.

In the past few months a series of incidents have occurred in the area of relations between the Government of President Garrastazu Medici and the Catholic Church. These separate events, cumulatively, have put a severe strain on the delicate balance of bilateral tolerance and understanding worked out only last May at a conference in Brasilia of the National Council of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) (See Rio's 3623).

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At that conference, which had been preceded by a build-up of Church-State tension somewhat similar to the present "confrontation", the air was presumably cleared when a mutually acceptable modus vivendi was arranged. The GOB, in the person of the President himself, apparently agreed to a quid pro quo with the Church hierarchy (as represented by the approximately 240 attending bishops). The Government, intensely concerned over its deteriorating image abroad, reportedly agreed that if the CNBB would refrain from all activities in the propagation of reports of violence in Brazil's prisons, the GOB would take reciprocal steps to reduce the level of that violence. (See Rio's 5239) The President reportedly also agreed to consult with Church officials before taking any serious actions against clerics accused of political crimes. For its part, the CNBB conference issued a manifesto, non-inflammatory and respectful in tone, which condemned the violence of terrorism but at the same time called on the GOB to investigate "to their roots" the charges circulating around the world concerning the mistreatment of political prisoners in Brazil. In other words, the Bishops condemned violence from either side. Prior to issuance of the bishops' statement several members of the GOB had expressed fear of a much stronger stand by the church. The non-provocative tone of the letter was well received by the Government and an aura of mutual understanding returned to the Church-State relationship.

The Church hierarchy, particularly its moderate leaders such as Dom Eugenio Sales, Cardinal Primate of Brazil, and Dom Agnelo Rossi, Cardinal Archbishop of São Paulo and long time President of the CNBB, rationalized this agreement on the basis that the important goal was to bring a halt to the violence rather than to confront the Government with probably unacceptable demands for the punishment of those who had already committed such acts. Both the Government and the Church hierarchy were equally relieved to have avoided a more serious confrontation. Obviously the Church leaders were impressed with President Medici's assurances that the Church's grievances were of great personal concern to him and that he would do everything he could to bring an end to the two most immediate problems -- the mistreatment of prisoners and the accusations against individual clerics of being subversives. Both institutions probably felt that they could henceforth devote their scarce resources to the real problems of Brazilian underdevelopment rather than expending them in an unwanted and possibly destructive confrontation from which both sides likely would emerge as losers.

This understanding, achieved in May barely lasted through August. The following is a brief description of the three major problems which have called the fundamental relationship between the two entities into question again:

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- A. Campaign Against Dom Helder Camara -- The controversial and outspoken Archbishop of Recife and Olinda has long been the target of GCB ire. He has been "out of step" with those who have governed Brazil since the first days of the 1964 Revolution. The principal tactics used against him until recently were: (1) to isolate him within the Church and among the populace at large by making it clear that the Government would not work in ^{any} program associated with him; and, (2) to deny him access to the national media to either propagate his anti-Government message or to defend himself against the "slings and arrows" of his enemies. Starting in early September, an obviously concerted and equally obviously government-backed campaign to destroy Dom Helder's personal image was begun. News broadcasters and journalists took every opportunity to describe Dom Helder's anti-GCB speeches in Europe as "traitorous". The strongest attack was a series of articles run in O Cruzeiro, a weekly picture magazine, by David Nasser, a journalist known to write with the blessing and funding of the National Security Agency (NSA). Nasser's weekly assaults ran from denunciations of Dom Helder's association in the 1930's with Brazilian integralism (neo-Fascism) to allegations that the bishop's travels abroad were planned and paid for by international Communism. In a word, that Dom Helder was an opportunistic and dangerous agent of the forces which seek to destroy Brazil.

This attack on Dom Helder, if designed, as some thought, to ruin the bishop's chances for the Nobel Peace Prize, was successful. If the object was to make Dom Helder a pariah within the Church, however, the campaign would have to be rated as a failure. The reaction among the Church hierarchy was to rally around their beleaguered colleague. When the Governor of São Paulo reiterated Nasser's charges that Dom Helder was a tool of international Communism disguised in a cassock, Dom Agnelo Rossi immediately demanded: (1) proof of the Governor's charges; and (2) an opportunity for Dom Helder to publicly defend himself.

- B. The Maranhão Priests Arrests -- Two priests were arrested in São Luís, Maranhão on August 3. By mid-August, fifteen Marathanist bishops had signed a strong protest charging that the Brazilian priest, one of the two, José Antonio de Magalhães Montalvão, had been tortured. On August 23, this denunciation was read from all Maranhão pulpits and in many other churches around Brazil. The CNBB presented a protest directly to President Médici. He promised an investigation. From all indications, it appears that the Church hierarchy, up to and including Cardinal Sallés, were convinced that the charges of torture against the priest were true. The state director of security categorically denied all charges. The impasse was subsequently worked out when the charges against the two priests were dismissed by a military court for lack of evidence. The aftertaste remained however -- particularly the feeling in the Church that the President would be unable to honor his promises of prior consultation with lower echelon officials.

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present him with a fait accompli from which he cannot appear to back down.

- C. Repeated Raids Against Catholic Affiliated Groups And Resultant Detention of Priests -- Starting on about September 11, Brazilian security forces carried out a series of raids on various Rio offices of Catholic social action affiliates. The first was against the Rio office of Juventude Operaria Catolica (a Brussels-based organization with affiliates in 85 countries). This was followed by raids on the local offices of Acao Catolica Operaria (ACO) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento (IBRADES). These raids resulted in the arrest of a dozen or so young laymen as well as four priests. The most embarrassing and newsworthy item was the detention for several hours of Dom Alcinio Lorscheider, Secretary General of the CNBB, who had hurried to the IBRADES office when he heard of the raid. All those arrested were held incommunicado until CNBB pressure and intervention at the Presidential level produced visitation rights for the arrested clerics by Dom Vicente Scherer, Cardinal Archbishop of Porto Alegre (and just named President of the CNBB to replace Cardinal Rossi -- who was named to a high Curia post). It was during this tense period that Pope Paul issued, in Portuguese, his condemnation of violence by a "large Catholic nation" -- which was interpreted by all as directed towards Brazil.

The month of October saw relative calm return. The Government perhaps feels that it is through the worst. Dom Helder Camara did not receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The President issued specific instructions that he or his Minister of Justice would have to be consulted before any cleric could be charged or arrested for a security crime. The reaction to the Pope's reference to violence was not of such magnitude as to create internal problems. The question remains, however, as to whether the Government is out of the woods in its relations with the Church.

Comment: There is little doubt that the Church-State issue is one of, if not the, most troublesome problems facing the GCB, particularly from the standpoint of prospects for substantial progress. Almost all sides of the political spectrum would agree with this. It was described as such recently, in an informal conversation by the head of the Army's Public Relations Section.

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He expressed the belief that the only solution lies in the improvement of the Brazilian standard of living to the point that the clergy no longer feels compelled to agitate for rapid change. He agreed that any such improvement would only come after years of effort, even with the best of policies on the part of the GCB, and that in the interim frictions are bound to occur with considerable frequency.

The essence of the problem is that there are within the Church, particularly among the young clergy, those who undertake activities which are interpreted by local security forces as "subversive" in that they are specifically prohibited under the National Security law or otherwise appear to subvert the existing political, economic and social order. Some of these priests may be deliberately flaunting the Government in order to provide reaction; most, however, are probably dedicated young men trying to perform their duties among Brazil's underprivileged in accordance with the dictates of their Christian conscience. The Vatican itself has endorsed efforts by the Church designed to eliminate economic inequalities and social injustices. It is not coincidental that the Northeast, the most poverty stricken area in the country, has produced many of the Church-State "incidents". There is no reason to believe that these priestly activities will diminish; on the contrary, an increase over time seems likely.

Nor is it surprising that local security forces often consider it their responsibility to curb some actions by these priests. The Embassy has heard of instances where Carmelites priests distributed leaflets urging the faithful to boycott the upcoming elections and where a recent sermon equated the social thinking of Christ and Lenin. The First Army Intelligence Chief in Rio said that his biggest security problem is with priests. The Army's Public Relations Chief, in highlighting the Government's concern over activities of this sort, stated that the Church is Brazil's most important and most influential propaganda agency; Church views on any particular issue can be scattered broadly throughout a region or throughout the country over night.

As arrests such as described above or other incidents occur, the Church's hierarchy has generally felt called upon to come to the defense of its priests. The fact that the GCB is often at war with itself among progressives, moderates, and arch-conservatives,

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does not diminish its view of a collective responsibility to defend members from outside attack. It is a reaction similar to that noted in the military officers' corps when one of its members is attacked by an outsider. Evidence of this tendency to come to the defense of any member of the clergy under attack is afforded by the recent letter which the CNBB prepared condemning those who are attacking Dom Helder Câmara. This is notwithstanding the undeniable fact that many of Dom Helder's activities and utterances have undoubtedly alienated many of his clerical colleagues.

The problem is not an absence of dialogue. Within the past few weeks, since the arrests of priests and lay workers in the raids in Guanabara, there have been at least three reported instances where Brazilian Cardinals had audiences with the President. From what we know of these meetings, the priests have come to President Médici in search rather than eager to elicit whatever assurances he might give them. The President for his part has assured the priests that he deeply regrets these incidents and that he will do everything to avoid them in the future. To our knowledge the President has not, however, been in a position to give further assurances. In each of these cases the clergymen have left the meeting mollified and convinced of the President's good intentions. However, the prospects of avoiding further arrests of priests do not appear favorable. Even if it wanted to, the Church hierarchy would be unable to curb the social reforming zeal of some of their young priests, who see the issue as a matter of conscience and as following the guidelines from the Vatican. The President, for his part, may be in a position to instruct his subordinate generals and police authorities to stay their hands in all cases but he will have a more difficult time assuring their compliance. To do so would be to fear the anger of some in the security forces who feel that the conscientious discharge of their responsibilities requires that clerical extremism be curbed.

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Perhaps the most one can hope for is that, in the future, arrests will take place only after an airing of the case by top level federal government clearance. Even here, however, it seems doubtful that the President's instructions will be capable of being followed entirely without exception. It is these exceptions which will repeatedly call attention to the basic problems which continue to exist in the context of Church-State relations in Brazil.

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